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Snyder, lawmakers partner to give Highland Park students options

LANSING, Mich. – Gov. Rick Snyder today signed emergency legislation that lets Highland Park students finish the school year despite the district's financial crisis.

Lawmakers on Thursday night moved swiftly to address the critical educational needs of Highland Park students by allowing them to remain in their current facilities or attend school in another district.

House Bill 4445 includes \$4 million to be used as \$4,000 per-pupil stipends that follow students currently enrolled in Highland Park schools. Money from the Distressed District Student Transition grants can go to another school district or a charter school that accepts Highland Park students, or if the student remains in Highland Park schools, the money must go to the operating entity that is brought in to run the school. The money will not be used for the Highland Park district itself.

"This temporary measure keeps Highland Park children in the classroom, where they deserve and need to be," Snyder said. "While this action does not solve the school district's financial and management situation, it does put the immediate needs of students and their families first by minimizing disruptions for the rest of this school year. There is still much work to do but this collaborative effort shows that we can rise to any challenge and find appropriate solutions. I applaud Senate Majority Leader Randy Richardville and House Speaker Jase Bolger for their leadership, and commend those legislators who put differences aside and acted in the best interests of Highland Park children."

Despite repeated state advances and bailouts, including a \$4 million hardship loan last summer and two advancements of state aid payments in the past month, it is expected that the school district will not be able to meet today's payroll.

In related news, the independent review team tasked with assessing HPS' financial situation met publicly this week and its members again solidly concluded that the district is facing a financial emergency. The governor has agreed with those findings. Additionally, the HPS Board met last evening and passed a resolution opting not to appeal the findings of the review team or governor, or the appointment of an emergency manager. Per the timeline outlined in Public Act 4, the soonest the governor can reinstate Jack Martin as emergency manager is late next week. Snyder is committed to ensuring full and open communication with Highland Park parents, teachers and community leaders. His most recent letter sent to parents this week outlined the district's financial challenges and ways in which state officials are working to minimize any disruptions to the education of Highland Park students. The governor also pledged that officials will conduct a public meeting to keep local residents informed. Details of the open forum will be announced.

Due to the urgency of the Highland Park schools situation, lawmakers used H.B. 4445 as a “vehicle” bill to appropriate the funding. H.B. 4445 is the school aid supplemental bill. In addition to the Highland Park student funding, it includes:

- \$12.5 million to the Office of Great Start within the Michigan Department of Education for early childhood funding. Specifically, \$3.25 million will go toward implementation of a statewide standard kindergarten assessment to determine a child’s readiness upon entering school. The initiative will link kindergarten readiness information with existing prenatal through age 20, or P-20, data system. The remaining \$9.25 million will provide services to early learning program providers in the Tiered Quality Improvement Rating System, which identifies quality levels of early childhood providers, holds programs accountable for child outcomes and provides parents with information about the early learning settings that are available.
- \$424,700 in adjustments for other post-employment benefits (OPEB) as a result of the decision by the governor and Legislature to begin prefunding state employee retiree health care in fiscal year 2011-12. The appropriation provides sufficient funds to pay for the increased cost of prefunding.
- \$4.7 million from the federal Education Jobs Fund that was provided to Michigan in fiscal year 2010-11. Michigan did not spend the entire amount of the grant. The program provides \$10 billion in assistance to states to save or create education jobs, including those that provide educational and related services for early childhood, elementary and secondary education.

A more detailed analysis of H.B. 4445 is at www.legislature.mi.gov.

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